REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The role of the Muslim Student Association at a South African university campus in promoting a sense of belonging, community service and a student-centred environment

Rôle de l'association des étudiants musulmans d'un campus universitaire sud-africain dans la promotion du sentiment d'appartenance, du service communautaire et d'un environnement centré sur l'étudiant

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions, unlike high schools, can be a very isolating environment for students due to the great diversity of students. Many students experience a sense of 'not belonging' and demoralization due to the lack of social interactions with the vast number of students in the institution's community. Student orientations are offered to first-year students within their faculties to provide a general welcome to students. However, student orientations are inadequate for students to find their sense of belonging in the greater community. Students feel a sense of belonging based on common interests, religious affiliations, and common belief systems. Several student associations based on these commonalities are established across universities in South Africa to establish a sense of belonging for individual students in the greater community. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) is one such student association that has been established for several years across various South African universities. This reflective practice article is based on the reflections of two lecturers (Muslim and non-Muslim) at a major South African university. The article aims to highlight the importance of the MSA at one campus of a major university, in creating a sense of belonging for students. The reflections encompassed the care-fostering initiatives, such as welcome events, Islamic talks and collaborations on quiz nights, in creating a sense of community (belonging) and collaboration among students. The secondary aim is to analyse the MSA's effectiveness in community service activities such as bake sales, winter-warmth hamper donations, food drives, volunteer work and fundraisers in creating a leadership and student-centred caring environment which benefits the students and the local disadvantaged communities. The Gibbs reflective model is used to capture the authors' reflections on the MSA and propose an action research plan to maintain and improve the MSA's initiatives.

KEYWORDS

Student association, student-centredness, community engagement, student inclusivity, student leadership

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RÉSUMÉ

Les instituts d'enseignement supérieur, contrairement aux écoles secondaires, peuvent être un environnement très isolant pour les étudiants en raison de la grande diversité des étudiants. De nombreux étudiants éprouvent un sentiment de « non-appartenance » et de démoralisation en raison du manque d'interactions sociales avec le grand nombre d'étudiants de la communauté de l'institut. Des séances d'orientation sont proposées aux étudiants de première année dans leurs facultés respectives afin de leur souhaiter la bienvenue. Toutefois, ces orientations ne permettent pas aux étudiants de développer un sentiment d'appartenance à la grande communauté en général. Les étudiants ressentent un sentiment d'appartenance sur base d'intérêts communs, d'affiliations religieuses et de systèmes de croyances communs. Plusieurs associations d'étudiants basées sur ces points communs ont été créées dans les universités d'Afrique du Sud afin d'établir un sentiment d'appartenance des étudiants individuels à la communauté dans son ensemble. L'association des étudiants musulmans (Muslim Student Association, MSA) est l'une de ces associations d'étudiants qui existe depuis plusieurs années dans diverses universités sud-africaines. Cet article de pratique réflexive est basé sur les réflexions de deux enseignants (musulman et non musulman) dans une grande université sud-africaine. Il vise à souligner l'importance de la MSA sur le campus d'une grande université, en créant un sentiment d'appartenance chez les étudiants. Les réflexions ont porté sur les initiatives de soutien, telles que les séances d'accueil, les discussions sur l'islam et les collaborations lors des soirées quiz, afin de créer un sentiment de communauté (d'appartenance) et de collaboration entre les étudiants. L'objectif secondaire est d'analyser l'efficacité des activités de service communautaire de la MSA, telles que les ventes de pâtisseries, les dons d'articles d'hiver, les collectes de nourriture, le travail bénévole et les collectes de fonds, pour créer un environnement propice au leadership et à l'entraide centré sur les étudiants, au bénéfice de ces derniers et des communautés locales défavorisées. Le modèle de réflexion de Gibbs est utilisé pour saisir les réflexions des auteurs sur la MSA et proposer un plan de recherche-action pour maintenir et améliorer les initiatives de la MSA.

MOTS-CLÉS

Association d'étudiants, centrage sur l'étudiant, engagement communautaire, inclusion de l'étudiant, leadership de l'étudiant

Introduction

The main focus of universities is seen to be the transference of knowledge and skills through teaching and research (Karimi & Matous, 2018). Less attention is given to the social lives and integration of students into the vast community of the institution. Unlike secondary education institutions, higher education institutions constitute a highly diverse student community. Students, particularly minority students, experience a sense of 'not belonging'. Pedler et al., (2020) define belonging in the higher education context as "subjective feelings of connection and integration with their institution and campus community". Students can feel demoralized and isolated due to the lack of interaction with students who share the same interests, beliefs and religious affiliations as themselves. The feeling of isolation and lack of social inclusion results in negative impacts on students' mental health and, hence, on their academic success and retention in higher education (Fan et al., 2013). There are many factors that lead to student attrition in the higher education sector such as unpreparedness, financial issues and course incompatibility (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). One important factor which is generally overlooked is not being able to find one's place in the diverse student body, as humans are social beings and need to feel like they 'belong' (O'Keeffe, 2013; Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). A sense of belonging is established through meaningful interactions

between people with common interests within a diverse student body, establishing social inclusion and integration (Karimi & Matous, 2018). Social inclusion and integration yield a positive effect on a student's social life and, hence, their academic performance and retention (Karimi & Matous, 2018). One such intervention to promote inclusivity and a sense of belonging is the encouragement of diversity and difference through student associations (Fan et al., 2013; O'Keeffe, 2013).

A student association/society is defined by Brew (1946) as a "community engaged in the task of educating itself". The benefits associated with student associations go beyond academics and are vital in the personal development of students (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). Student associations have several roles and benefits within the higher education sector. The benefits of student societies in addressing matters of inclusion and community are threefold. First, to improve student life, in particular for minorities, by creating a safe space for meaningful interaction with students who share common interests and beliefs. Second, to develop social integration and inclusion among students through the creation and empowerment of a community (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013). Lastly, the sense of belonging created in these communities and social inclusion leads to reduced student attrition and improved academic performance (Pedler et al., 2020).

Student associations are prevalent at various higher education institutions around the world, with much emphasis on the benefit of student associations in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia, as the diversity of the students is ever-increasing (Gallagher & Gilmore, 2013; Karimi & Matous, 2018; Fan et al., 2013). Post 1994, with the abolishment of apartheid, the diversity of students in South African higher education institutions has increased from a predominantly white student body; hence the need for diverse ethnic, religious and interest-based student societies in South African universities to create social inclusion and integration (Cradit & Wawrzynski, 2018). Religious student associations create essential platforms for students with common beliefs to come together and create a community that is empowered and united to find a path of seeking knowledge, imparting knowledge and doing good for the communities around them (Ansari, 2018). This is achieved through community engagement projects, student-led activities and community service projects and awareness projects. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) is a student association that has been established in several Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia, and in Nigeria on the African continent (Song, 2013; Fawzi, 2019; Ansari, 2018; Balogun, 2022). In South Africa, the MSA was first established in 1974 across several universities under apartheid rule (Mahida, 1993). Till today the MSA is an active student society aiming to create a safe space for students to come together to find a sense of belonging as well as serve the communities in need around them.

This reflective practice article aims to highlight the importance of specialized student associations, in particular the MSA, in creating a sense of belonging for students in the greater community at higher education institutions. Reflections on the effectiveness of initiatives such as welcome events, academic support, Islamic education talks and collaborations on quiz nights to create a sense of belonging through collaboration among students are presented. Additionally, a reflection on the effectiveness of the

MSA in community service activities such as bake sales, food drives, winter-warmth hamper donations, volunteer work and fundraisers in creating a leadership and student-centred caring environment that not only benefits the students, but also disadvantaged communities, is evaluated. The Gibbs reflective model will be utilised to demonstrate the authors' reflections as lecturers at one campus of a large university in South Africa. The activities and initiatives encompassed in this article are restricted to the 2022 academic year.

The Muslim Student Association (MSA) in South Africa

The South African MSA was pioneered in 1974 at several universities (Mahida, 1993) to cater to the specific needs of the community and harmonise the community's thoughts and actions. The MSA began articulating their stance against the apartheid regime in 1976 through several banned publications (Mahida, 1993). Today the MSA exists at most South African universities. The MSA at one of several campuses of a major South African university is reflected upon by two academics based at the campus in this reflective article.

Establishment and purpose of the MSA

The MSA under reflection was established in 2007 with the aim of establishing a prayer area for Muslim students on campus. At the time of writing this article, the MSA in question had 744 followers on its Instagram page, with over 300 posts demonstrating their community engagement and student-centredness initiatives. The society then evolved into a specialized student association to bring together students from different disciplines with the same religious beliefs to create a sense of community and belonging to foster care amongst students and the wider South African communities. This endeavour was accomplished through student-centred activities, community engagement drives, mentorship programmes and imparting Islamic knowledge and teachings.

Author two, the Muslim academic at the South African university, reflects on the stated purpose and objectives of the MSA, as indicated in its constitution:

- By being a non-profit organization, the MSA demonstrates its dedication to community service without financial motives, aligning with its primary goal of supporting and uplifting the Muslim student community.
- Through its initiative to promote brotherhood and sisterhood, the MSA fosters unity and joint action among members, emphasising the importance of building strong bonds within the Muslim student community and among students of the wider university and community members.
- By encouraging and enabling Muslim students, the MSA empowers Muslim students with Islamic knowledge and competence to contribute to community needs, emphasising individual and collective efforts guided by the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah.

- The MSA assists Muslim students in spiritual, social, and intellectual endeavours, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to addressing various aspects of students' lives.
- By avoiding practices contrary to Islamic laws, the MSA underscores its dedication to upholding Islamic principles and maintaining religious integrity in all activities and initiatives.
- Through its initiatives to promote unity and joint action, the MSA encourages collaborative efforts for the community's best interests, demonstrating collective action and cooperation to strengthen the Muslim student community and its outreach initiatives.
- Through non-discriminatory membership, the MSA welcomes all students without discrimination, reaffirming its commitment to diversity and inclusivity to create an environment welcoming students from diverse backgrounds.
- By organizing activities and events to make Islamic teachings known to both Muslim and non-Muslim students, the MSA fosters awareness, understanding, and dialogue about Islam within the university community, and uses these principles as a foundation on which student-centredness is promoted through student initiatives, and community engagement is achieved.

Structure and organization of the MSA

The MSA has a 15-member dynamic executive committee that is elected annually. The association is run and funded by students. The MSA's governance structure is depicted in Figure 1.

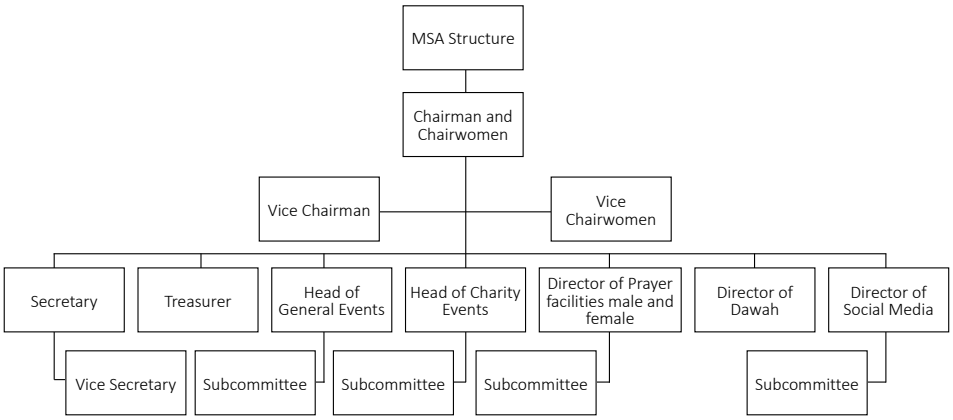

Figure 1: The Muslim Student Association (MSA) structure

As shown in Figure 1, the chairpersons (male and female) lead and represent the MSA within the university and in other organizations. The vice-chairpersons (male and female) serve as the MSA spokespersons and work closely with the chairpersons in decision-making. The secretaries (secretary and vice-secretary) are responsible for the administration of the MSA and ensure effective communication and documentation. The

head of charity events and subcommittee organize the charity drives and initiatives that contribute to the upliftment of disadvantaged communities in and around the campus. The head of general events and subcommittee organizes the MSA's activities and events. The directors of Jamā'ṯ Khana (male and female) maintain the prayer space and ensure its proper functioning. The treasurer ensures the financial stability and accountability of the MSA by maintaining records of all financial transactions and collecting/depositing funds. The director of Dawah promotes Islamic teachings and practices. The director of social media maintains close ties with the Muslim community and uses various social media platforms to unify and reach out to all students on campus to promote MSA initiatives.

The MAZLAQ network

To simplify communication between members and the executive committee, the MAZLAQ network was established by the executive committee in 2021. The seven-step procedure is a hierarchical network designed to avoid miscommunication and promote awareness of the MSA's initiatives, charity work and social activities. The MAZLAQ network is adapted from the constitution of MSA and elaborated upon in Figure 2.

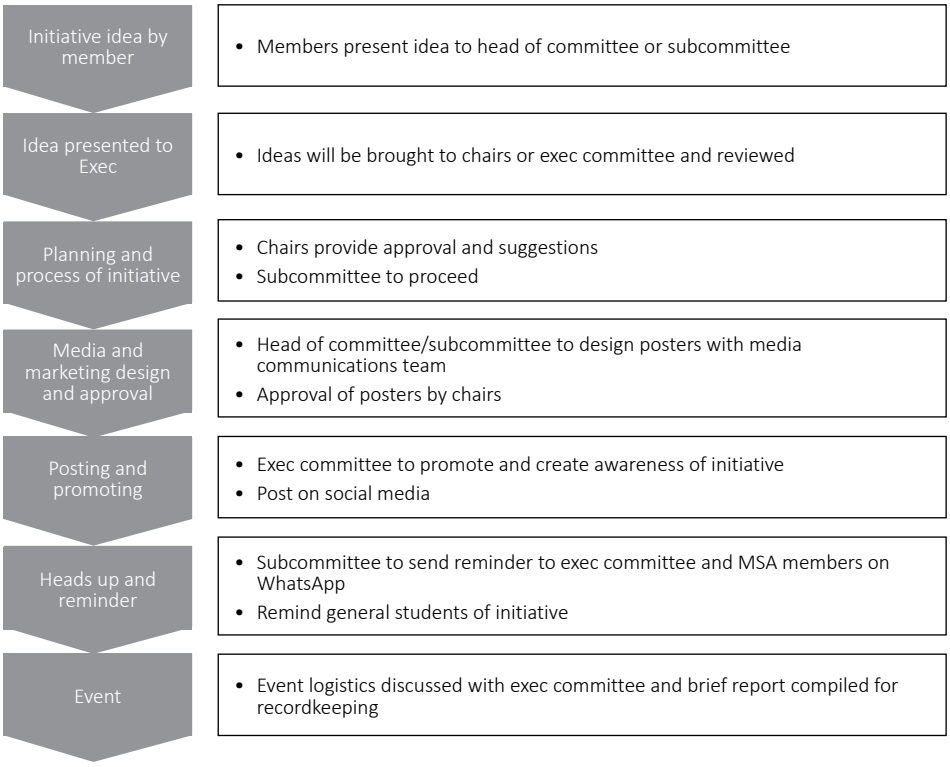

Figure 2: The MAZLAQ network of communication presented in the MSA constitution

Author two's reflection of the MAZLAQ hierarchy

I believe that the MAZLAQ hierarchy aids the MSA in fulfilling its purpose to create a student-centred environment by adopting an inclusive approach for members to execute initiatives that will foster meaningful social interactions outside of academic activities. This reflection is supported by Astin (1993). The initiatives developed, promoted, and held by the MSA are classified into two categories namely: (1) initiatives that promote care and a sense of belonging and (2) community service initiatives. I believe that both categories of initiatives enhance a student-centred environment of students prospering both personally and academically.

The role of the MSA in promoting care and a sense of belonging

According to Cradit & Warwrzynski (2018), students partaking in initiatives of religious student associations have a stronger feeling of belonging. Hence, the MSA plays a crucial role in promoting care and, hence, a sense of belonging for its members within the larger student body. Care encompasses empathy, compassion, and support for individuals' emotional, academic, and spiritual well-being. From the analysis of 2022 and 2023 reports, and social media posts, the MSA, under reflection, creates a caring, nurturing, and inclusive environment for students through the various initiatives and activities offered by the society.

Further research suggests that student organizations play a role in fostering a sense of community and belonging on campuses. When the study of Nora & Cabrera (1996) investigated the role of perceived prejudice and discrimination in the adjustment of minority students in higher education, it was found that student organizations for minority groups help alleviate isolation, provide a platform to deal with any forms of prejudice, and create a supportive community of care. It is interesting that the MSA offers the same advantages to Muslim and non-Muslim students. Strayhorn (2012) further reveals that a sense of belonging on campus is needed for student success. Moreover, the direct feedback of the MSA students revealed how the MSA creates a sense of belonging and connection to the greater university environment (see section 5).

'Belonging' is a nuanced construct with varying aspects reported in the literature. The study of Baumeister & Leary (1995) considers the human need to belong and explores how the desire for interpersonal attachments is a fundamental motivation. The study also considers the psychological aspects of belonging and the adverse consequences of isolation that result if the need to belong is not fulfilled. The earlier study of McMillan & Chavis (1986) explores the sense of community, which is connotated with the concept of belonging. The study outlines four elements of belonging and sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Notably, the feedback received from the MSA students by the current authors (see section 5) indicates that each of these elements of belonging is being fulfilled by the MSA. Such belonging can aid the academic achievement of students (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and aid the overall health and well-being of students (Haslam et al., 2009).

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MSA initiatives in promoting care and enhancing a student-centred environment

Author two's reflections of the effectiveness of the MSA's initiatives in creating care and hence a sense of belonging is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: MSA initiatives to promote care and belonging

Initiative/Activity	Implication	Reflection
MSA welcome event A welcome event was held in February 2022 to create awareness of the MSA and provide an opportunity for new and existing students to join and learn about the aims and goals of the MSA.	Emotional care	*Welcome events promote a culture of care and inclusivity, showing students that they are valued members of the wider community. By facilitating connections, fostering friendships, and facilitating information and knowledge about the MSA, welcome events create a sense of belonging and contribute to a supportive and nurturing environment for students (Rudisille et al., 2012).*
Eid letters The executive committee assist students in obtaining letters to excuse them from class or assessments that fall on religious holidays. The letters are sent to the respective lecturers by the MSA.	Academic care	*The MSA's initiative in facilitating the provisions for rescheduling classes and assessments during religious holidays creates a sense of belonging, in that it demonstrates that Muslim students' beliefs and holidays are respected by the institution. Islam et al., (2018) confirm this observation as similar provisions made for Muslim students in the study conducted felt a strong sense of belonging.*
Jamā'ت Khana maintenance The prayer and ablution facilities are constantly maintained by the MSA for all Muslim students and staff to use. The MSA ensures the facilities are cleaned and prayer gear for Muslim females is available.	Physical and spiritual care	*Islam et al., (2018) conducted a study into a sense of belonging for Muslim students in the UK. The study showed that the most important factor that made Muslim students feel a sense of belonging was primarily having a Prayer Room available on campus. Hence, the upkeep and maintenance of the prayer facilities are imperative not just for students' sense of belonging but academic and support Muslim staff as well.*
Ramadhan quiz and trivia night Recreational activities that enhance knowledge and understanding of Islam are endorsed by hosting an online Ramadhan quiz and a physical all-you-can-eat trivia quiz in April and October 2022 respectively.	Social and spiritual care	*The recreational activities comprising quiz and trivia nights provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers, facilitating social connections and a sense of community and belonging in the university (Stuart et al., 2009).*

Initiative/Activity	Implication	Reflection
Islamic reminders Several social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are used to educate and inform students of the following: • Hadeeth of the day • Islamic holidays • Weekly Jummah times and details • Ramadhan posts **Islamic talks** are organized by the MSA with learned individuals in different fields of Islamic knowledge and the talks are hosted online. The following talks were organized and presented: • Pursuit of Truth (14 March 2022) • Islamic week (28 March 2022)	Spiritual care	*Through religious education endeavours such as Islamic talks and education posts on social media, individuals gain knowledge about their faith, its values, and teachings, which in turn helps them develop a sense of identity and belonging within the greater student community. This reflection is supported by the study of Ansari (2018).*
Soccer tournament A recreational physical soccer tournament was organized by two MSA chapters at the campus under reflection and MSA at another university.	Social and physical care	*I believe that involvement in student engagement activities such as a sports team leads to a 'sense of belonging' whilst maintaining good physical care through exercise. This reflection is supported by Soria et al. (2022) and Humphrey & Lowe (2017). Additionally, the friendships formed in the team create personal engagement, inclusion and lifelong learning (Mann, 2001).*

Based on the findings and reflections presented, it is evident that the MSA plays a crucial role in promoting care and a sense of belonging among its members within the larger student body. The initiatives and activities offered by the MSA contribute to creating a caring, nurturing, and inclusive environment for students. Through events like the welcome event, students are invited into the sisterhood and brotherhood of the association. Specifically, welcome events contribute to the emotional care of students by providing an opportunity for new and returning students to connect with each other and form a community, which is crucial for emotional well-being (Lambert et al., 2013). The positive social interactions cultivated during welcome events contribute to positive emotional experiences, which play a vital role in overall psychological well-being (Fredrickson, 2001).

The MSA's facilitation of the provision of assessment and class exemptions on religious festivals demonstrates academic care and respect for Muslim students' beliefs and holidays. The maintenance of prayer facilities by the MSA ensures physical

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and spiritual care, which has been shown to be essential for Muslim students' sense of belonging. Recreational activities such as the Ramadhan quiz and trivia night provide social and spiritual care, promoting engagement and a sense of community. The dissemination of Islamic reminders through social media and the organization of Islamic talks contribute to spiritual care by enhancing students' knowledge and understanding of their faith. Additionally, participation in the soccer tournament fosters social and physical care, promoting a sense of belonging and well-being. Overall, the MSA's initiatives encompass various aspects of care, contributing to a student-centred environment that fosters meaningful social interactions, a sense of belonging, and a purpose beyond academic activities.

Author one's reflection of the MSA in promoting a student-centred environment

As a non-Muslim academic based at the campus of the MSA chapter, I believe that the MSA serves the significant purpose of helping develop young adults to balance their material and spiritual lives. By the MSA establishing itself for the students, and among the students, the participating students stand a greater chance to maintain their spiritual lives alongside their studies. When these students graduate and begin their careers, I believe that they will have a stronger chance of remaining spiritually connected due to the foundation provided by the MSA during their tertiary education years. I also believe that the relationships built by these students with other students (both Muslims and non-Muslims) and members of the community will transcend campus life, and support these students as they progress in their lives and careers. Additionally, I believe that such strong and meaningful connections are certain to add meaning and a sense of lifelong community in the lives of the students concerned.

Author two's reflection on the MSA's promoting a student-centred environment

Figure 3 shows the Gibbs reflective model that was utilised by author two, as a Muslim academic based at the campus of the MSA chapter under reflection, to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives and activities the MSA implemented in 2022 to create a sense of belonging and hence foster care amongst students that are members of the association. Based on these reflections, author two presents an action research plan for the MSA in the conclusion section.

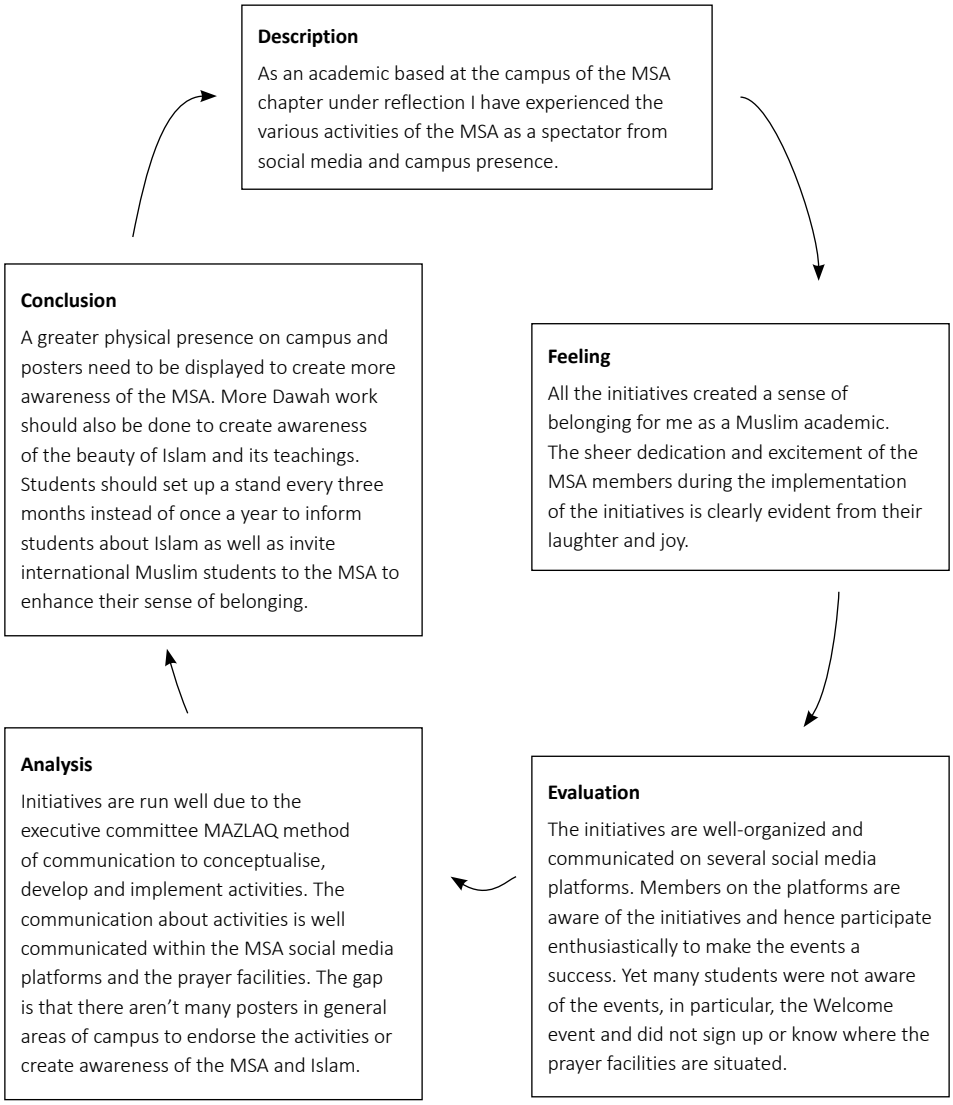

Figure 3: Gibbs reflective model for MSA initiatives address issues of sense of belonging and care

The role of the MSA in fostering community service activities and supporting disadvantaged communities

Upon evaluating the MSA yearly reporting document for 2022 and social media platforms, like WhatsApp and Instagram (2022 and 2023), it is evident that the association is involved in several community service and outreach projects. Through these projects, several impoverished communities in and around Johannesburg, namely

Vrededorp, Lenasia South, Klipspruit and Eldorado Park, are supported by the MSA outreach projects.

Community engagement activities of the MSA

Table 2 provides the community service activities established by the MSA in 2022 and continued in 2023. It presents the details of each initiative and the communities supported.

Table 2: MSA community service initiatives, and corresponding impacts

Community service activity	Details	Impact on community
Iftaar Drive	During the month of Ramadhan two drives were embarked upon. The first was to distribute a wholesome soup to disadvantaged communities to break their fast. The second is a feeding drive in which members came together to raise funds for ingredients and cooked the meals themselves for distribution to feed the poor to break their fast.	Soup drive – soup distributed to 150 people in Vrededorp Feeding drive 1 – food distributed to 150 people in Lenasia South Feeding drive 1 – food distributed to 150 people in Klipspruit Feeding drive 1 – food distributed to 150 people in Eldorado Park
Qurbani Drive	The MSA collects any meat donations from Eid-Ul-Adha for distribution to disadvantaged communities.	Qurbani meat collected was distributed in the community of Klipspruit
Winter Warmth	A donation drive was implemented in May 2022 to raise funds and items to create winter hampers for the homeless and poor. ZAR 33 685 was raised in monetary funds. Items collected for the 200 hampers included: • Soup packet • Blanket • Rice • A loaf of bread	Winter hampers were distributed by MSA members to the community in Klipspruit Soweto (4708 Klipspruit ext. 11 corner Buckingham and Union Road)
Abaya and Thobe collection	Abaya and Thobe collection box was placed in both the male and the female side prayer facilities to collect	Abayas and Thobes were distributed in the community of Klipspruit
Syria and Turkey Fundraiser – Cake Sale	A cupcake sale was set up on campus to raise funds for earthquake victims in Syria and Turkey	R50 419.00 was raised and sent to Turkey and Syria to fund projects aimed at helping the earthquake victims through the Gift of the Givers

Community service activity	Details	Impact on community
Israeli Apartheid Week	A week-long awareness campaign was hosted at the campus by hanging up posters all over campus as well as ending the week by releasing the Palestinian flag in solidarity against war crimes in Palestine.	The entire university community came together to release the flag and create a Palestinian flag with the handprint of all students on campus.

Leadership is an integral part of the successful functioning of societies (Amirianzadeh et al., 2011). The development of social, scientific, cultural, artistic, empathetic and ethical leaders using universities and higher education institutions is essential (Amirianzadeh et al., 2011). Astin (1993) described membership and active involvement in university student association initiatives as crucial factors in students' leadership development. Reflecting on the MSA executive committee structure in Figure 1 and the roles of each member in the executive committee are enablers in developing leadership skills aligned with the national strategic plan and essential for the future leaders of South Africa (Cradit & Warwrzynski 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). The process of implementing a community service project encompasses considering a range of perspectives, developing a shared idea, creating awareness and efficiently executing the project whilst exhibiting regard for varying viewpoints and individual diversity, all skills that can be developed as a member of the executive committee of a student society (Cradit & Warwrzynski 2018). Through endeavours such as Israeli Apartheid Week, which highlights social-justice initiatives, MSA develops a future generation of social justice-oriented leaders (Cradit & Warwrzynski 2018). Astin (1993) found that involvement in associations could result in better student-to-student communication skills, such as the MAZLAQ hierarchy developed by the MSA in 2021 to improve communication in the association.

By attracting spiritualists from other cultures and faiths to participate in the universal charity drives, the MSA aids in interfaith engagement, cultural exchange, and diversity initiatives on campus. These activities help engage the MSA students with students from the larger university community. Such findings were observed in the work of Patel (2007) which explores interfaith engagement and the experiences of Muslim students on college campuses and provided anecdotal evidence to justify the MSA's success in connecting Muslim students to the larger university community. Such a connection of students from diverse backgrounds was found to have educational benefits by the Chang et al. (2006) study.

Overall, the MSA's effectiveness in creating a student-centred environment by fostering community service and supporting disadvantaged communities can also be shown through member engagement and empowerment in the outreach projects. I feel by providing opportunities for MSA members to actively participate in community initiatives, take leadership roles, and develop skills, the MSA creates a culture of social responsibility and empowers its members to make a meaningful difference.

Author one's reflections on the MSA's community engagement initiatives

The MSA forms a critical pillar of student support within the higher education landscape. As a non-Muslim spiritualist, I believe that the MSA strongly promotes a student-centred environment by providing support services for students in need (regardless of religion, race, gender, and other material aspects), and engaging students in activities to benefit the wider community. Such shared action strongly promotes a sense of community and belonging.

I consulted the MSA's social media (Instagram) page to identify its outreach programmes. I found that the MSA hosted various community engagement activities during 2022 and 2023 to support the local underprivileged communities surrounding the university. These initiatives included (but were not limited to) bake sales, fundraising to support the South African Islamic Medical Association's Cataract Project to raise funds for 100 cataract surgeries, winter warmth drives to support the underprivileged Klipspruit community, and Ramadhan feeding drives to feed the underprivileged Klipspruit community every Sunday during the month of Ramadhan. I believe that these activities directly support the local surrounding community in need by providing food, blankets and winter wear, funds, and medical support (cataract removal surgery) to those in need.

Considering that the MSA is open to all students (not just Muslim students), the MSA students are afforded opportunities to connect to and engage with other university students through MSA initiatives, such as movie nights and charity events. These occurrences would ensure that the MSA connects Muslim students to the wider university community.

Author two's reflections on the MSA's community engagement initiatives using the Gibbs reflective model

Figure 4 contains author two's reflections on the MSA's community engagement initiatives using the Gibbs reflective model.

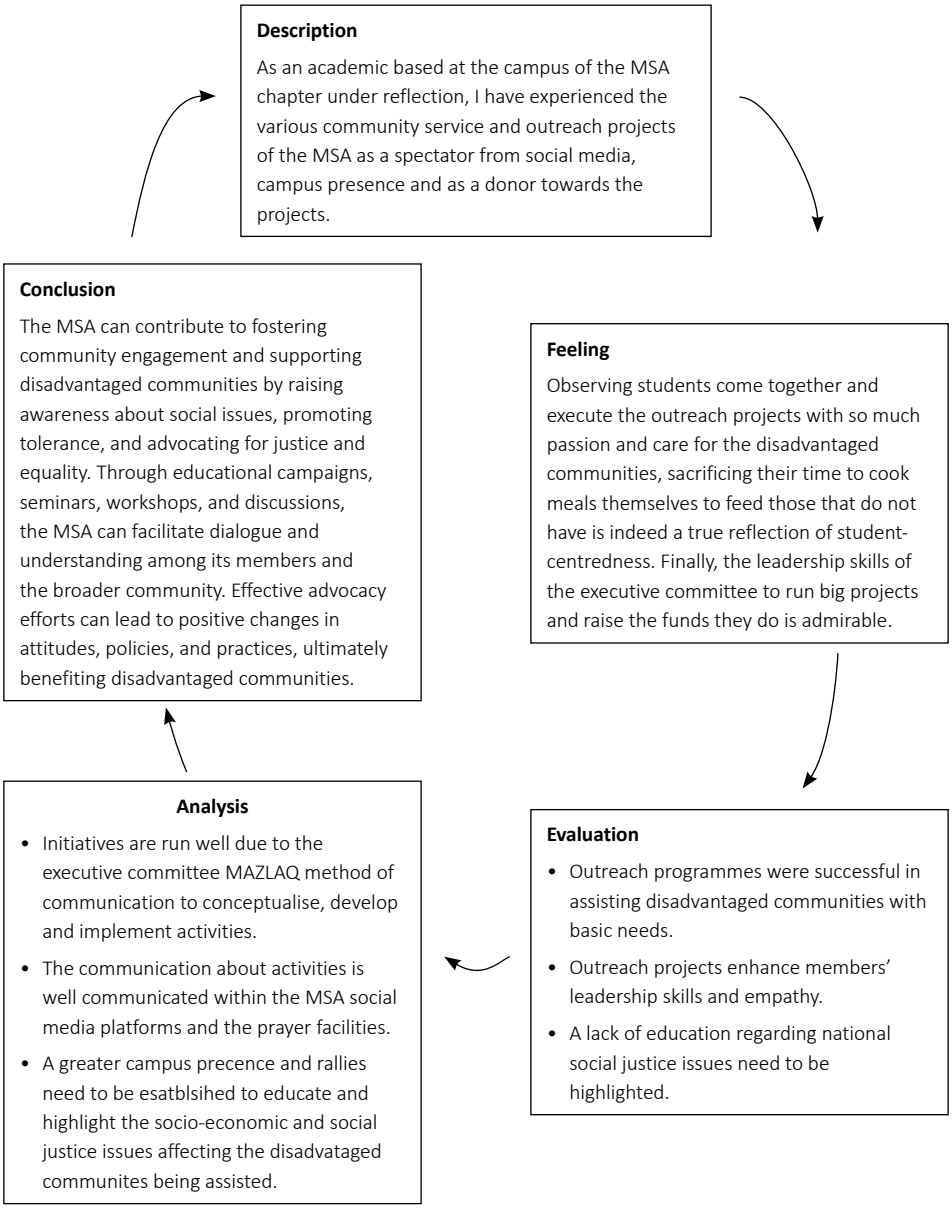

Figure 4: Gibbs reflective model for MSA community service and outreach projects

But how well is the MSA functioning in promoting student centredness? What do the students say?

Current student feedback on the MSA's activities in fostering a student-centred environment was sourced from the MSA's chairperson. Regarding how students' involvement in the MSA impacted their sense of community and belonging on campus,

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Student 1 responded: "*My involvement with (the) MSA has positively influenced my life on campus and impacted my sense (of) community as well, by creating a sense of belonging and a community of togetherness and support*".

Regarding the ways in which the MSA contributed to their personal growth and development as students and community members, two responses are shared:

> *Student 1: As a student it helped my communication and my social skills. I also managed to network very well with people from all of (the university) and with people from different departments and degrees. As a community member it allowed me to see the places in which I could contribute and where I could (help) my community.*
>
> *Student 2: The MSA contributed positively to my growth as a student, taught me to be adaptable and innovative as a student, and it has inspired me to be more proactive as a student and community member, to help anywhere you can.*

Concerning the extent to which the MSA fostered a sense of care and support among its members, particularly during challenging times or personal crises, two responses are illustrative:

> *Student 1: Being part of the MSA is like being part a family. Everyone is there for one another. Whenever you need help – whether it be personal or academic. We can always count on each other.*
>
> *Student 2: To a very large extent the MSA has fostered a very comforting sense of care, and the members are very supportive and understanding.*

Consequently, the students ranked the MSA's efforts in promoting community engagement, such as volunteering, charity work, and outreach programmes, as "good" and "excellent", respectively.

Regarding specific initiatives or changes that could be implemented by the MSA to create a more student-centred environment and better serve the needs and interests of its members, two responses are shown:

> *Student 1: Have more campus-based activities for students and interact more with the students.*
>
> *Student 2: Initiate or host more activities or programs on campus to benefit students or engage with students.*

Based on the evaluation of the MSA by the two students in the organization, the following conclusions can be drawn about the MSA's effectiveness in promoting a student-centred learning environment:

The MSA succeeded in creating a sense of community and belonging. Student 1 expressed that their involvement with the MSA has had a positive influence on their campus life, creating a sense of belonging and togetherness. Mentioning a "community of togetherness and support" suggests that the MSA has succeeded in fostering a supportive community atmosphere.

Concerning the MSA's contribution to personal growth and development, both Student 1 and Student 2 highlighted positive impacts. Student 1 emphasised improvements in communication, social skills, and networking, both within the university and across different departments, while Student 2 mentioned that the MSA taught them adaptability and innovation, inspiring them to be more proactive as both a student and a community member. Furthermore, responses from both students indicate that the MSA succeeded in fostering a sense of care and support among its members. Student 1 described the MSA as a "family" where members are there for each other, providing support in both personal and academic matters, while Student 2 expressed that the MSA has created a comforting sense of care, and its members are supportive and understanding.

The students' ranking of the MSA's efforts in promoting community engagement as "good" and "excellent" suggests that the association is actively involved in volunteering, charity work, and outreach programmes. Such positive feedback indicates that the MSA is making meaningful contributions beyond its immediate membership. However, both students provided specific suggestions for improvement, emphasising the need for more campus-based activities and increased interaction with students. This could be an indication that the MSA is not having sufficient campus-based activities, or that students are not adequately informed of the planned activities. Either way, the improvement plan recommended by author two can address this suggestion.

Overall, based on the students' responses, the MSA appears to be effective in fostering a sense of community, contributing to personal growth, providing care and support, and engaging in community outreach. The suggestions provided by the students could be valuable for the MSA in further enhancing its student-centred initiatives. Overall, the feedback reflects a positive impact on the student experience at the South African university.

Conclusions and recommended actions

This article emphasises the significance of specialized student associations, particularly the MSA, in fostering a sense of belonging and community among students at higher education institutions. It highlights the importance of social inclusion and integration in promoting students' mental health, academic success, and retention. Student associations, such as the MSA, play a crucial role in addressing the needs of diverse student communities, providing safe spaces for meaningful interactions and shared interests. Islam et al. (2018) highlight in their work that the lack of an MSA at a UK small-medium higher education institution was the main reason for many Muslim students not feeling a sense of belonging in the university environment. This current article highlighted the importance of a religious/specialized student association in fostering care and, hence, a sense of belonging for its members in the wider student body. This sense of belonging and development of leadership skills are enhanced by the MSA chapter at one campus of a major university through several initiatives that bring society together for meaningful interaction.

The establishment and purpose of the MSA in South Africa showcase its commitment to serving the Muslim student community while upholding the principles of Islam. The MSA's structure and organization, with its elected executive committee and various leadership roles, demonstrate a student-centred approach to governance and decision-making. The MSA's constitution outlines its objectives, including creating brotherhood and sisterhood, empowering Muslim students, and providing spiritual, social, and intellectual support.

The MSA's activities, such as charity events, general events, and Dawah (spreading Islamic teachings), contribute to its mission of community service, knowledge sharing, and creating a sense of belonging. The MAZLAQ network, as a communication tool, ensures effective information dissemination and fosters awareness of the MSA's initiatives among its members, enhancing and developing leadership skills.

Finally, the MSA exemplifies the importance of student associations in creating inclusive environments, promoting social integration, and enhancing students' overall university experience. By providing a platform for students to connect, learn, and serve their communities, the MSA and similar associations play a vital role in supporting the holistic development and success of students in higher education.

Based on the authors' reflections and the feedback of the MSA students, the proposed action plan (Table 3) outlines how the MSA can be improved over time, such that it can attract new students, and improve its services to its current students, to enable and maintain a student-centred environment.

Table 3: Proposed action plan for the MSA

Step	Aspect	Description
1	Conduct a needs assessment	Engage with current MSA members to identify their needs and expectations and survey the broader student body to understand their interests, concerns, and expectations regarding the MSA. Thereafter, analyse the data collected to identify areas for improvement and strengths.
2	Define the vision and mission	Create a clear vision statement that reflects the desired future of the MSA. Develop a mission statement that outlines the purpose and goals of the MSA. Check that the vision and mission align with the expectations identified in the needs assessment.
3	Establish clear roles and responsibilities	Define specific roles and responsibilities for the MSA leader. Ensure each position has well-defined duties to avoid overlapping responsibilities. Encourage inclusivity by allowing interested students to apply for leadership positions on a regular basis.
4	Enhance communication and outreach	Develop a comprehensive communication plan to alert members about MSA activities, and opportunities. Utilise various communication channels. Actively engage with other student organizations, departments, and community groups to foster collaboration and partnership.

Step	Aspect	Description
5	Organize regular events and programmes	Plan a variety of events and programmes that cater to the diverse interests and needs of the student body. Include educational, social, and spiritual activities to create a well-rounded experience for members. Offer workshops, seminars, and guest lectures on topics relevant to Muslim students and the wider community.
6	Provide support services	Establish mentorship programmes to connect new students with older members who can provide guidance and support. Offer academic support services. Develop initiatives to address the mental health and overall well-being of members.
7	Foster a welcoming and inclusive environment	Create a safe and inclusive space which welcomes all students, regardless of background or level of religiosity. Celebrate diversity by organizing events that highlight different cultures, traditions, and perspectives. Encourage open dialogue and discussions about important issues to promote understanding and tolerance among members.
8	Continuously evaluate and improve	Regularly assess the effectiveness of MSA activities, and programmes through feedback surveys and focus groups. Use the feedback to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments. Maintain open communication with members to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

Ethics statement

No ethical clearance was required, as the authors' reflections comprise the results and discussions in this reflective practice article. Being aware that reflections may be subjective, several measures were implemented to ensure the objectivity of the authors' reflections: (1) the literature was used to justify the authors' reflections and arguments, (2) the Gibb's reflective model was applied to maintain structure and objectivity, (3) information was sourced from the MSA's constitution and social media accounts to justify the authors' points, and (4) MSA students' perspectives were incorporated in the article for triangulation of the authors' views of the MSA.

Potential conflict of interest

There were no conflicts of interest involved in authoring this article.

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